

Star Wars

Wizard's RPG Stories

source : <http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=starwars/newsarchive>
upload : 10.IV.2006

Living Force: One Minute to Midnight

By August and Cynthia Hahn In a single instant, everything can change. A life can be irrevocably altered by one decision or a happenstance so quick, so brief, it is almost impossible to see. In one tick of the clock, the future can look bright. In the next, there may be no future at all. Fortunes shift in the blink of an eye, turning princes into paupers and heroes into villains.

As the last moments of an age crawl past, the fate of the Cularin system seems clear. But nothing is ever over until it is over, and sometimes, not even then...

Darrus stepped out of the lift and took a moment to check his appearance. He'd been chided too many times by Mar'ek about how he presented himself around the ship to greet the returning ARC Trooper looking anything but his best. He'd caught a quick nap, showered, and even had his armor and robes repaired. His hair was pulled back in his typical fashion, loose and held in a silver-accented band.

His lightsaber rested on his hip, as did the custom blaster he'd received as a gift from his friend, Aayla. "Someday," she'd teased him when she gave him the weapon, "when you are as good a Jedi as me, you won't need this." He smiled at the memory, wondering for a moment how she fared on Felucia.

With a spring in his step that had been missing for many months, he hurried to the Maelstrom's landing bay. His personal guard didn't like to be kept waiting and, to be honest, he'd feel better after talking with them about his decision to return to Cularin. They didn't have to know about his orders to the contrary, of course, but he didn't like lying to them. He hoped that when he explained his reasons, they would support his choice. If not - -

Well, he'd drive that speeder when he came to it. If he had to, he could always take the Legacy and leave the Maelstrom to complete the mission he couldn't bring himself to perform. The clones, he knew, would do what they were asked; it was a realization that he'd never dwelled on before now, but it was no less true for his ignorance.

The clones would follow orders, no matter what. If the Council or the Chancellor commanded them to barrage a civilian population center, they would do it without hesitation. He wanted to believe that at least Mar'ek and his fellow ARC Troopers would have more autonomy, but he couldn't really be sure. Even the Advanced Reconnaissance Commandos were clones, and there was no telling what programming had gone into their forced learning regimens.

He passed his transport as he crossed the primary hanger. The lift to the shuttle bays was on the other side of the huge chamber, so even at his brisk pace, he was in for quite a walk. He didn't mind; for the first time in a long

while, he felt at peace. He was making the right decision, even though his long-ingrained sense of duty told him he was wrong.

He shrugged off the doubt, affectionately stroked the side panel of the Legacy's cockpit as he passed it, and pressed the button on his wrist communicator. "Bridge, is the shuttle safely aboard?"

The voice of his navigations officer replied. "Yes, sir."

He smiled to himself. "Good. Close all outer doors and set course for Cularin. I want best possible speed to the system."

"Understood. Sir?"

Jeht frowned at the glowing bracelet, hoping his men weren't going to start questioning him already. "Yes, trooper?"

"There was an intermittent signal a few moments ago. It read like a capital ship contact, but we lost it from our scopes. It was pretty distant, but it was definitely - - "

"If it's not attacking us, soldier, ignore it." Darrus sighed. The clone troopers were efficient to a fault, and he had more important things to worry about, like going home. "It's probably a Separatist scout ship. Just make the jump to hyperspace, and leave it in our stellar dust."

"Right away, sir. But there is the possibility that it will be able to track us if we jump so close to it, sir."

He shook his head, amazed at his crew's concern with minutiae. "Being tracked does not concern me, trooper. Where we're going, a single ship wouldn't dare follow. Just make the jump; am I clear?"

The officer's reply was instantaneous. "Crystal, sir!"

Chuckling softly to himself, Darrus reached the lift and opened it, stepping inside with a sweep of his charcoal grey robes. At least the clone troopers' adherence to orders still worked in his favor, but that would change if they received commands from higher up the chain of command. That worried him; he'd have to do something about that if he ever hoped to reach Cularin with a loyal crew. He hated to do it, but he just might have to - -

"Sir?" His wrist comm blared again.

"What is it, soldier?"

"There is a transmission from Coruscant, sir. Priority One. Origin point is the Jedi Council Hall."

Darrus winced slightly. He'd been afraid of this. Somehow, the Council had already heard that he'd defied orders. "Route the signal to my quarters; I'll take it after greeting my entourage in the shuttle bay."

"Of course, sir. Bridge out."

No choice now. He touched another button on his wrist comm and sent a tight, encoded signal to his astromech. The message was a simple one - - the ship's communications network needed to have an immediate, unfortunate systems failure, preferably one that would take days to fix. As much as the droid loved to fix things, it seemed far more adept at breaking them, anyway.

By the time his elevator reached the secondary hangar bays, the carrier light on his wrist communicator was dark. That meant the ship's entire array was offline.

As he reached for the button to open the lift doors, he was hit by a sudden, powerful wave of mental trauma. Pain, anguish, and a terrible shock flooded his awareness, driving him to his armored knees. He reeled, barely catching himself on the lift's rail bar, as the Force tore through his defenses and engulfed him in the dark waters of death.

But not his own. He struggled to clear his mind, to clear his inner vision. There was such pain, such horrible loss. He could see... birds? Foliage of bright hues and exotic forms. A jungle paradise. But the images quickly faded as he sensed the stink of burned flesh and ozone.

It was Felucia. It was Aayla! He could feel her pain; he was feeling her die! "No!" he screamed into the confines of the lift car, with no one to hear his grief. He desperately clung to the last moments of her mind, her fading life, as a drowning man would clutch at burning driftwood. In her last heartbeat, Darrus saw white-booted feet and the blaze of blasters. He saw, in that final second, his sweet friend's killers.

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When the lift doors opened, Mar'ek and his men fired enough rounds from their heavy DC-15 rifles to drop a charging Rancor. As the incandescent glare of their devastating salvo faded, they could see that their target was - -

Gone. Nowhere to be seen. The back panel of the lift was a slagged wreck, most of its framework warped by the energy discharge, but there was no body, no ashes, no trace of their quarry. Mar'ek gestured silently for one of his men to advance on the lift and check the blind spots on either side of its sliding door.

The clone soldier advanced, weapon raised, and quickly pivoted left and then right as he reached the opening. "Nothing, sir. Car's clear."

A second later, his helmet exploded forward in a shower of purple radiance as a lightsaber arced through it from above. Darrus dropped from his position against the roof of the lift and fell in a crouch behind the now-headless trooper. Mar'ek shouted for his squad to open fire, but the dead clone's body absorbed the wave of incoming bolts.

Then he was on them, leaping impossibly high out of the glowing doorway to avoid their rapid barrage. Mar'ek was the only one fast enough to track Darrus with his weapon, but even his battle-sharpened reflexes could not catch the blur that descended on his squad in a tempest of violet rage.

Diving to avoid the Jedi's attacks, Mar'ek rolled clear of the fray and

rose to a kneeling position, rifle raised to take advantage of Master Jeht's preoccupation with cutting his men apart. Limbs and armor flew in all directions as each of the elite troopers fell to Darrus's blade. As the last one dropped, cleaved in half from right shoulder to left hip, the ARC Trooper seized his one and only chance to fire.

He squeezed the DC-15's trigger, but nothing happened. The last three inches of his rifle's barrel had been shorn through, the victim of Master's Jeht's first swing. As quickly as he could, Mar'ek threw the gun aside and reached for his pistols. He brought them to bear as his back hit the hangar bay wall, but he had nothing to aim at. The Jedi was gone.

His weapon, on the other hand, reappeared instantly. A glowing curve of violet, the lightsaber flew through the air and collided with the ARC Trooper's guns. There was a dual spray of molten metal and the searing agony of an energy blade ablating away both his hands. Then, as Mar'ek collapsed in shock, he saw the burning sword reverse direction and fly back to its master's waiting grasp.

He tried to get up and fight, but the pain was too intense, his foe too swift. By the time Mar'ek could struggle to his feet, Darrus was already lifting him off the ground and smashing him into the plate steel behind him. He crumpled to the deck, rolling over nearly insensate as the Jedi Master reignited his lightsaber and brought its hissing point to his throat.

"Where is she?"

Mar'ek tried in vain to reach the other troopers on the ship, to call in backup. The Maelstrom's communications were down; he was on his own. If he'd had even a single finger left, he would have pressed the release on the grenades at his belt and taken the Jedi with him, but that was not an option.

Darrus made a gesture with his free hand and the ARC Trooper's helmet tore free, hurtling through the air to shatter against the airlock doors a dozen meters away. He pressed his blade forward until Mar'ek felt its searing heat. "Where is she?"

With a derisive spit, Mar'ek glared up at his former commander. "Dead, just like you'll be soon. You and your whole Order!" It was a lie; he'd marooned Trilinae on a remote world much against her will so she would be safe. He just didn't want to give Darrus the satisfaction of knowing she was alive.

He was defenseless and no longer a threat; the Jedi Code meant he'd be taken prisoner now. Humiliating, but acceptable. Later, when he was released and his hands replaced, he could go back and rescue her. After the war, after the Jedi and the Republic were gone. She would see that he'd saved her life, and together, they could - -

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Darrus pulled his lightsaber out of the ruined hole that was his former friend's face. He felt nothing as he walked away from the murder, using the Force to gather the remnants of his bodyguard squad and throw them into the airlock. He sent them into the dark reaches of space without so much as a

single tear. She was dead. Aayla was dead. Now, inside, so was he.

There was nothing left but to go back and do what he promised. He no longer really cared, but inertia would have to carry him where emotion once had.

Cularin. He'd return to Cularin.

What else was there?